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ABSTRACT

To document the frequency of sharing in the context of classroom activities, a total of 116 preschool children 3 to 5 years of age were observed for half-hour periods in 17 classrooms of 4 preschools. Sharing was defined as interchanges in which the original holder grants to another child the partial use, or possession of a thing. All observations were taken during periods of unstructured activities, or free play. During the 30-minute interval, observers waited for interchanges to occur and then recorded the age and sex of the participants, along with the type of initiation, response, and outcome. Initiations and responses were recorded as being either verbal, physical, or a combination of these, and outcomes were categorized as either sharing, unwilling transfer, or no sharing. Results indicate that the predominant exchange was physical grabbing followed by a physical refusal to share. Refusals to share were largely ineffective since initiators frequently managed to obtain by force the object they wanted. However, when sharing did occur it was usually in response to a verbal request. While subjects showed a strong tendency to interact with same-sex partners, same-sex and cross-sex partners were found to be similar in their overwhelming tendency to not share. (RH)

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Sharing in Preschool: A Naturalistic Observation

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Abstract

Sharing interactions of 116 preschoolers between the age of 3 and 5 were observed for half-hour periods in four preschools. Instances of willing sharing were rare, and did not increase with age or vary by sex. The predominant exchange was physical grabbing followed by a physical refusal to share. However, as evidence of rudimentary prosocial awareness, when sharing did occur it was usually in response to a verbal request.

Sharing in Preschool: A Naturalistic Observation

Among the concerns of those involved in preschool education is the development of the young child's social skills. In the typical preschool classroom the young child is required to interact with many other children, to play and work in groups, and to share in the use of commonly owned instructional materials and toys. The purpose of this study was to investigate preschoolers' sharing behavior in this natural social context. Sharing interactions were examined in terms of reciprocal interchanges characterized by initiations, responses, and outcomes.

In a study examining reciprocity in preschoolers' social interactions, Leiter (1977) observed the social initiations and responses of 16 preschoolers aged 2 1/2 to 5. In particular, Leiter was interested in interactions where a social initiation by one child was followed by a response by another. The target children (chosen after several days of informal observation) fit into one of the following categories: 1) most assertive, 2) friendly, leader, 3) friendly, follower, and 4) passive, whiny. Two males and two females were chosen for each category. Leiter found that friendly initiations were the most common type of initiation, followed by demanding, then whiny, respectively. However, because half of Leiter's subjects were chosen for their friendliness (e.g., friendly, leader and friendly, follower categories) these results may not generalize to the preschool population at large. Leiter also found that there was reciprocity in the children's initiations and responses. Friendly initiations were generally followed by agree responses (e.g., comply,

acquies, accept, etc.). Demanding initiations, on the other hand, were associated with coercive responses (e.g., hit, yell, shove, threaten, etc.). Whiny initiations were usually ignored.

Reciprocity in preschoolers' social interactions has been found by others. Charlesworth and Hartup (1967) found that the amount of reinforcement given by one child is highly and positively correlated with the amount of reinforcement received. Friendship selection has also been found to be associated with a child's own behavior toward a peer as well as with the peer's behavior toward them (Masters and Furman, 1981).

Preschoolers also show a marked preference for interacting with same-sex partners. Previous research has found that both boys and girls give more reinforcement to same-sex partners (Charlesworth & Hartup, 1967), display a higher rate of social behavior when playing with same-sex partners (Jacklin & Maccoby, 1978), and also that the majority of friendship selections come from same-sex classmates (Masters and Furman (1981).

The purpose of the present study was to document the frequency of sharing in ongoing preschool classrooms. Although sharing (defined in various ways) has been extensively studied, there is a need to confirm the results of limited observational or laboratory studies in a real-world setting. For instance, we wondered whether Leiter's (1977) finding of the predominance of friendly initiations would be replicated in a substantially larger and more representative sample of children. Our overall goal, then was quite general; e.g., to provide an accurate picture of what sharing interchanges are like in the actual

preschool environment. Moreover, we were interested in going beyond the mere documentation of sharing events by exploring how preschoolers initiate these negotiations and whether they respond differently to various types of requests.

Given this overall goal, and limited resources, several decisions had to be made concerning the most efficient means of obtaining valid and generalizable information. First, it was decided to define sharing as interchanges in which the original holder grants to another the partial use, enjoyment, or possession of a thing. The concept of an interchange means that two parties were actively involved, in that the first party (the initiator) indicated a desire that the second party (the possessor or responder) give up possession (at least momentarily) of an object to the initiator. A potential drawback of this definition was that instances of spontaneous sharing (i.e., when a child spontaneously offers to share something with another) would not be included in our observations, thus underestimating the frequency of positive sharing events. However, pilot observations suggested that such spontaneous sharing was extremely rare, and moreover that it was not possible to distinguish such cases from the less altruistic events that would more accurately be characterized as "giving" or "giving up," such as when a child who has finished playing with a toy disposes of it by "giving" it to another child who had not requested it.

A second problem regarded how to observe without disturbing the natural preschool environment. Fortunately, as the classrooms were physically organized so that the teacher would be able

to observe the activities of all the children, it was not difficult to accomplish this objective. Only two observers were used in each classroom and it was not necessary to manipulate the seating arrangement or interview the children in order to record their activities accurately. Thus the observational procedure did not draw the children's attention to the fact that they were being observed and thus did not put them on their "good behavior."

Third, a decision was made to examine the preschool classroom as it is naturally constituted (at least in Southern California), without introducing any manipulated independent variables into the observational setting. The two selected variables of age and sex were used, both because they were readily available and because they addressed important questions about the development of the prosocial behavior of interest. Do older preschoolers share more readily than younger children? Are girls more willing to share than boys? Do children's preferences for same-sex interactions influence their willingness to engage in sharing exchanges with same vs. opposite-sex partners? Information about other potential variables of interest, such as birth order, SES, ethnic group membership, resource availability, and so forth, was not readily available. Instead, by observing a relatively large sample of classrooms such variables were left to vary freely so as to increase the generalizability of our overall results.

Method

Subjects

One hundred and sixteen preschoolers ranging in age from 3 to 5 were observed in 17 classrooms at four preschools in Orange County, California. Two of the preschools served middle-class families, and were affiliated with major universities. The other two preschools served families of middle-to-low SES; one of which housed a Head Start program that provided bilingual education for Spanish-speaking children. Generally speaking, the children observed interacted in English.

Children qualified for inclusion in our observations if they engaged in a sharing interchange during the half hour in which their class was observed. Of the approximately 275 children attending the 17 preschool classes sampled, 116 children were observed engaging in property transactions during 8 1/2 hours of observation. Of the children observed, there were 70 boys and 46 girls. The ages of the children were obtained from the teachers and were only available in yearly intervals. The ages were distributed as follows: age 3, N = 32; age 4, N = 56; and age 5, N = 29. No attempt was made to observe equal numbers of different aged or different sex children; rather, our goal was to observe classrooms of preschool children as they were actually constituted.

Procedure

The observers arrived at the classroom approximately 15 minutes before observations were to begin. The purpose of this short delay was to allow the children to get used the observers'

presence. All observations were taken during periods of unstructured (or free play) activities. The two observers stationed themselves where the children could be seen and heard while remaining as unobtrusive as possible. Each classroom was physically organized so that the observers could readily watch and hear all the childrens' activities. The classrooms were divided into small sections by book shelves and cabinets approximately 2 1/2 feet high making it easy to observe each group of children within these sections. During the 30 minute interval, the observers waited for interchanges to occur and then recorded the age and sex of the participants, and type of initiation, response and outcome. Initiations, responses, and outcomes were divided into the following categories:

Initiations:

Verbal--demands, threats, polite requests

Physical--grabbing either the toy or the possessor, hitting

Combination--some kind of verbal request accompanied by either grabbing the toy or the possessor

Responses:

Verbal--a verbal refusal of the initiator's request

Physical--guarding or otherwise hanging on to the toy through use of the body; physical retaliation by hitting initiator either with the toy or hands

Combination--a verbal refusal accompanied by a physical response

Sharing--a willing transfer to the toy to the requestor

Outcomes:

Sharing--the responder willingly gives up the toy to the requestor

Unwilling Transfer--the responder gives a nonsharing response but the initiator gains possession of the object either through force or through the intervention of another party

No Sharing--the responder cannot be persuaded to give up the toy and/or the initiator terminates his or her request

Inter-rater reliability was checked during two sessions; one with the two principal observers and the other with one of the observers and a third observer unfamiliar with the study. During these sessions the observers focused on the same group of children. Across both sessions inter-rater reliability was 97%.

Results

Initiations

The relative frequency of each type of initiation was examined in a one-way repeated measures analysis of variance. The dependent measure was the frequency of each type of initiation exhibited by a given initiator per half-hour observation. The results showed that the frequency of initiation categories varied significantly, $F(2,190) = 24.16$, $p < .01$. The 96 children who initiated property exchanges did so by using physical means 122 times, which significantly exceeded the frequency of verbal initiations (44), and combination initiations (35), whose frequency did not differ, Newman-Keuls $p < .05$.

A subsequent analysis compared verbal vs. physical initiations (the verbal plus physical category was included under "physical" initiations) as a function of age and sex of the initiator. Our rationale for the verbal-physical di-

chotomy was that verbal initiations represent the more socially acceptable behavior, whereas any initiation involving physical means (whether accompanied by a verbal request or not) is considered impolite in our culture. The 3 (age) x 2 (sex) x 2 (initiation type) mixed unequal-N anova showed that the only significant factor was initiation type, $F(1,90) = 60.42$, $p < .01$. There were no significant main effects of age or sex, nor were there any significant interactions.

Responses

The relative frequency of each type of response was examined in a one-way repeated-measures analysis of variance. The dependent measure was the frequency of each response exhibited by a given responder per half-hour observation. The results showed that the frequency of response categories varied significantly, $F(3,288) = 5.12$, $p < .01$. The 96 responders used a combination of verbal plus physical refusal 82 times, which significantly exceeded the other response categories, Newman-Keuls $p < .05$. Verbal refusals (35), physical refusals (37), and sharing (47) responses did not differ significantly.

A subsequent analysis examined response as a function of age and sex of the responder. For this analysis the responses were grouped into two categories: (1) acquiescence (sharing), and (2) refusal (any kind of refusal). The 3 (age) x 2 (sex) x 2 (response type) mixed unequal-N anova showed a significant effect for response type, $F(1,90) =$

32.85, $p < .01$. As in the analysis of initiations, there were no other significant effects. Thus, the favored style of response was refusal (usually by bodily guarding the desired object). Responses, like initiations did not vary as a function of age or sex.

Outcomes

The relative frequency of each type of outcome was examined in a one-way repeated-measure analysis of variance. The dependent measure was the frequency of each outcome for a given responder per half-hour observation. The results showed that the frequency of outcomes varied significantly, $F(2,190) = 23.35$, $p < .01$. Instances where no sharing occurred happened 118 times, which significantly exceeded instances of unwilling transfer (42) and sharing (45), which did not differ, Newman-Keuls $p < .05$.

Responses and outcomes varied somewhat. Although responders tried to refuse 157 times, the initiator was only denied the desired object in 118 cases, unwilling transfers having taken place on the other 42 occasions. In other words, initiators obtained what they desired 43% of the time, but only 22% of the time was it because the responder willingly relinquished the object.

Initiation-Response Sequences

Children's responses as a function of initiations were examined in a 2 x 2 chi-square analyses. Initiation categories used in these analyses were verbal vs. physical initiations, and the response categories were acquiescence

vs. refusal. The first analysis included all of the 201 observations and yielded a significant Yates-corrected chi-square of χ^2 (1) = 42.68, $p < .01$. As can be seen in Table 1, physical initiation leading to refusal was the predominant interchange, constituting 68% of the events observed.

Insert Table 1 about here

It is interesting to note, however, that when verbal initiations did occur (21.90% of the initiations), sharing resulted 61% of the time. Thus, even though verbal initiations were relatively infrequent, responders were prone to oblige verbal requests with sharing. Physical initiations, in contrast, lead almost exclusively (87%) to refusals.

Since subjects were likely to participate more than once in the initiation or response tallies in the overall analysis, a subsequent chi-square was performed that did not violate the independence assumption. For each subject only the first observation was counted, and the results were again significant, Yates-corrected χ^2 (1) = 16.91, $p < .01$. Thus, the pattern observed in the overall sample was supported with the less representative, but more statistically legitimate, subsequent analysis.

Same-sex vs. Cross-sex Interactions

Finally, it was possible to obtain an estimate of the tendency of young children to interact with same-sex partners. The results showed a significant overall pattern

of same-sex interaction for the sample as a whole. The children interacted with same-sex partners 74% of the time, a significant proportion as shown in a 2 (sex of initiator) x 2 (sex of responder) Yates-corrected chi square, χ^2 (1) = 35.04, $p < .01$. A subsequent analysis including only the childs first observation was also significant, Yates-corrected χ^2 (1) = 12.64, $p < .01$. The proportion of same-sex interactions (71%) remained highly similar to that found in the overall sample. We wondered whether there would be a higher occurrence of sharing between same-sex partners than cross-sex partners. When same-sex pairs were compared with cross-sex pairs on overall frequency of refusal vs. acquiescence, the result (Yates-corrected χ^2 = 1.61) was nonsignificant. Thus, the findings of refusal as the predominant response to a sharing initiation did not differ for same-sex vs. cross-sex partners.

Discussion

Our purpose was to study the occurrence of sharing interchanges in a large representative sample of preschool classrooms. We found that instances of successful sharing interchanges were very infrequent. Although roughly 275 children were present in the classrooms, only 116 children were observed participating in the target interaction during our half-hour observation periods. For these 116 preschoolers, the proportion of their interactions that resulted in sharing (defined as a request followed by the willing giving up of an object) was only 22%. Although the

frequency of such interchanges is undoubtedly influenced by many factors (time of day, availability of materials, characteristics of teachers/classrooms, etc.), the large sample of 17 classrooms observed enables the following conclusion. The average preschooler probably engages in very few successful sharing experiences in the preschool environment. Yarrow and Waxler (1976), Barton and Osborne (1978), and Bar-Tal, Raviv and Goldberg (1982) have also reported low rates of sharing behavior in preschoolers, using somewhat different definitions of sharing.

Furthermore, the results also documented how preschoolers typically initiate sharing interchanges. We did not find, as Leiter (1977) did, that friendly initiations were the most common type of initiation. One possible explanation for this discrepancy is that half of the 16 target children in the Leiter study were chosen for their friendliness. In contrast, we found that preschoolers don't often ask a classmate for something verbally. On 78% of the interchanges, preschoolers used the less socially desirable method of physically grabbing the object to indicate their wishes. This finding did not vary for boys vs. girls, nor were older preschoolers less likely to use this means than younger children.

How do preschoolers typically respond when a classmate indicates a desire that they share something? We found that preschoolers don't readily give up their possessions. In 77% of the observations they tried to avoid sharing, most

often by bodily guarding the desired object. Responses also did not vary as a function of age or sex. The refusals were largely ineffectual, however; on a large proportion of these occasions (78%) the initiators managed to obtain the object anyway, usually through brute force. This figure agrees with the report of Hay and Ross (1982), who found that 82% of conflicts between preschoolers were struggles over toys.

Our most interesting finding was that sharing, when it did occur (22% of the observations), was more likely to have been preceded by a verbal initiation than by a physical initiation. Physical initiations most often resulted in refusal. These results support Leiter's (1977) findings that friendly initiations yielded the highest proportion of agree responses while demanding initiations resulted most often in coercive responses. This reciprocity may be evidence that preschoolers feel some social obligation to respond favorably to a "socially acceptable" verbal request. However, if obtaining the desired object is reinforcing of the verbal request, why did the frequency of verbal requests fail to increase with age? An alternate explanation is that preschoolers only use verbal initiations in situations where they have some prior expectation that the responder is indeed willing to relinquish the object. If they anticipate a lack of cooperation, the more assertive physical grab is attempted. In order to verify (or reject) this explanation, further information is needed about young children's expectations in various social situations.

Finally, the children showed a strong tendency to interact with same-sex partners. This voluntary segregation by sex has also been reported in observation studies (Charlesworth & Hartup, 1967; Masters & Furman, 1981; Goldman, 1981) and in a laboratory setting (Jacklin & Maccoby, 1978). The reasons for such early interactional preferences based on gender are not presently known. However, our results tentatively cast doubt on the hypothesis that children choose same-sex partners because they interact with them more successfully; same-sex and cross-sex partners were not found to differ in their overwhelming tendency to refuse requests to share.

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Table 1

Initiation-Response Interactions

	Response		
Initiation	Acquiescence	Refusal	Total
Verbal	27	17	44
Physical	20	137	157
Total	47	154	